

We've Been Surging For Years: More troops in Iraq than reported

The total comes to 300,000 to 360,000, more than twice the "official" figure.

By [Don Monkerud](#)

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The U.S. uses a number of deceptions, definitional illusions and euphemisms, including counting only "combat forces" and "military personnel," to drastically undercount the number of U.S. forces involved in Iraq, which are at least twice the number as those quoted in the media.

Even President Bush's January announcement of a "surge" of 21,500 U.S. troops, opposed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has now morphed into 30,000 troops with an additional "headquarters staff" of 3,000, although the currently reported total U.S. military in Iraq is 145,000.

The number of U.S. forces reported by the government, required to occupy a country slightly more than twice the size of Idaho, hides the true extent of vast U.S. resources invested in personnel, material and other costs. The real number is almost impossible to find in government released information even with a great amount of interpretation.

According to GlobalSecurity.org, a public policy organization that provides background information on defense and homeland security, keeping track of American forces has become "significantly more difficult as the military seeks to improve operational security and to deceive potential enemies and the media as to the extent of American operations." According to John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org, there are a number of other reasons affecting the accurate counting of the number of military forces involved in Iraq. Large numbers of troops are activated with unspecified duties to unspecified areas; many small units from various locations are being mobilized from the army and national guard, which count units differently; and groups rotate in and out of Iraq so quickly it's impossible for anyone but the Pentagon to calculate how many are there. The Pentagon tracks these numbers, but Pike says they aren't telling.

"We only try to nail the numbers down when we think Americans are getting ready to blow someone up," Pike says. "The Pentagon knows the numbers and we have certainly not done anything to highball it. Certainly, if there's a chance to release or hold numbers, they are parsimonious."

Additionally, private enterprise military "contractors" almost double the number of U.S. forces in Iraq. After four contractors were hung from a bridge in Fallujah in March 2004, the Bush Administration stonewalled congressional efforts to force the Pentagon to release information about the number of contractors in Iraq. Finally, the Pentagon reported a total of

25,000.

In "The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security," Deborah D. Avant, director for the Institute for Global and Internal Studies at George Washington University, reports that official numbers are difficult to find, but "This is the largest deployment of U.S. contractors in a military operation." In October, the military's first census of contractors totaled 100,000, not counting subcontractors, and in February 2007, AP reported 120,000 contractors (which would put Bush's "surge" closer to 50,000).

Contractors, which some call mercenaries, provide support services essential to maintaining the U.S. military presence in Iraq. Ten times the number of contractors employed during the Persian Gulf War, these contract mercenaries now cook meals, interrogate prisoners, fix flat tires, repair vehicles, and provide guard duty. Military personnel formerly filled these types of jobs until former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld instituted his "Total Force" plan, which relies on a smaller U.S. military force with "its active and reserve military components, its civil servants, and its contractors." Senator Jim Webb of Virginia called this a "rent-an-army."

What are the total of U.S. forces are in Iraq? The government reported 145,000 U.S. military forces in Iraq but John Pike estimates the current total at 150,000. Another 20,000 will arrive as part of the "surge," a last gasp public relations effort to save the operation from total failure.

John Pike estimates another 30,000 are "in the theater" to provide "Operation Iraqi Freedom" support. The army and marines have another 10,000 to 20,000 in Kuwait, and a nearby air force wing-bombing group has 5,000. Current naval exercises in the Persian Gulf, which represents a show of force against Iran for kidnapping 15 British sailors, include 10,000 U.S. personnel, the carrier groups Eisenhower and the Stennis, and 15 warships.

Add the 120,000 contract mercenaries and the forces involved in the Iraqi operation and the total comes to 300,000 to 360,000, more than twice the "official" figure of 145,000 troops. This isn't counting the more than 5,000 British combat troops and navy, down from a high of 40,000 during the initial invasion, or the rag-tag remnants of the highly vaulted "Coalition of the Willing," which has dwindled since the beginning of the occupation to 27 mostly small countries such as Armenia, Estonia, Moldavia and Latvia. Manipulated figures and private military contractors provide the Bush Administration with political cover to escape public scrutiny and keep injuries, deaths and secret operations out of the public eye. A more accurate and honest view of participation in the Iraqi occupation by the government could give Americans more reason to oppose the waste of lives and resources on this ill-conceived, poorly planned, and disastrous Keystone Cops venture.

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